Like a habit, I’m thinking of you

—"I try calling you but there’s no answer."

TAEMIN - Press Your Number

The room was thick with a bitter, familiar haze of trapped cigarette smoke. Hong sat cross-legged on the floor, his back pressed against the base of the sofa where he had wept into Lego's gray sweater nights before. The same spot. Like his body had claimed this territory of grief and couldn't leave it.

He was wearing a faded, oversized black shirt—one he'd owned since he was seventeen, so worn the fabric was translucent in places. His chemical-silver hair fell in uncombed, chaotic clumps across his forehead. He hadn't showered in two days. Hadn't left the apartment in three.

Hong pulled a fresh cigarette from the crumpled pack on the floor, his silver rings clinking sharply against the metal tin as his hands shook. He struck the wheel of his lighter—once, twice, three times before the flame caught. The orange light flared to life.

He inhaled deeply, letting the smoke fill his lungs until the burning in his chest temporarily drowned out everything else. The memory of fifteen-year-old promises. The image of Nut's hand on Est's shoulder. The museum tickets still sitting on his bedside table like evidence of his own failure.

A single, hot tear escaped his eye, cutting a clean path through the shadow on his pale cheek.

He remembered the abrupt ending. The sound of his mother's voice screaming about shame and disease. The cold metal of the scissors cutting his hair—not a haircut but a punishment, each snip removing evidence of who he'd been. The forced transition to a home where he had to perform to survive. Where love was conditional. Where being himself was a crime.

You will not embarrass this family. That's what she'd said. As if loving Nut had been about embarrassment instead of about being fifteen and scared and finding the only person in the world who made him feel real.

Hong took another drag. Held the smoke. Let it out slowly.

The apartment was silent except for the hum of the refrigerator and the distant sound of traffic outside. His phone sat on the coffee table, screen dark. Fourteen missed calls from Nut. Twenty-three unread messages in the group chat.

He couldn't look at them. Couldn't bear to see Nut's name. Couldn't face the

inevitable questions that he had no answers for.

Why are you mad at me? What did I do? Please talk to me.

Because answering would require honesty. And honesty would require vulnerability. And vulnerability would require removing the armor he'd spent eight years building.

And Hong didn't know how to be that naked anymore.

The Silent Chat

Last message: 4 days ago

For the first time since the group had formed, the chat went quiet. Days passed without messages. The vibrant, chaotic stream of consciousness that had defined their friendship—Lego's stickers and exclamation points, Hong's sarcastic commentary, Nut's steady invitations to the studio, Tui's random facts, William's occasional photo drops.—all of it vanished into an unyielding void.

When someone finally did post something, the silence that followed was deafening.

William: (photo of a sunset from campus) Golden hour today.

Three hours later:

Tui: Nice shot.

And that was it. No follow-up. No conversation. No avalanche of responses and jokes and plans forming organically the way they used to.

The absence of noise was louder than any argument.

Nut sat at his workstation, staring at his phone.

He had tried everything. Texts. Calls. Showing up at Hong's apartment—though Hong either wasn't home or was pretending not to be, because the lights were off and the door stayed locked no matter how long Nut knocked. He'd sent voice messages. Kept them casual at first, then increasingly desperate.

Hey, just checking in. Let me know you're okay.

Hong, I don't know what I did, but I'm sorry. Can we talk?

Please. I miss you.

Nothing. Radio silence. Like Hong had disappeared from the earth entirely. And Nut

was losing his mind trying to figure out what he'd done wrong.

He replayed the confrontation over and over. The museum. The lie—or not lie, exactly, but the minimization. The way he'd made it sound like nothing when Est had called it "the whole afternoon."

Was that it? Was Hong upset because Nut had downplayed the time he'd spent with Est? But why would that matter so much? They were all friends. Nut spent time with everyone. That was normal. That was what friendship looked like.

Unless there was something Nut was missing. Some context he didn't have. Some history or feeling or thing that made this different from every other time.

But what?

Nut sat across from Tui in a corner booth, nursing a cup of coffee that had gone cold twenty minutes ago. Tui was eating pad krapow, working his way through it methodically while listening to Nut talk. Or try to talk. Mostly Nut was just spiraling.

"I don't understand," Nut said for the third time. "Hong's mad at me. Lego ran after him. Est stopped coming to the studio completely. And I don't know what I did. I keep going over it in my head, and I can't—I can't figure out where it went wrong."

Tui set down his fork. "Have you asked Hong directly?"

"He won't answer my calls."

"Have you asked Lego?"

"He says it's complicated."

"Have you asked Est?"

"Est apologized to me," Nut said, running a hand through his hair. "He came by the studio yesterday and said he'd been coming for the wrong reasons. That he needed to step back."

Tui leaned back, thinking. "Maybe Est was using you to figure something out. And Hong saw it. And that's why he's upset."

"But why would Hong care?" Nut asked, genuinely confused. "We're all friends. If Est needed help, isn't that what we do? We help each other?"

"Not if helping one person hurts another person," Tui said quietly. "Sometimes being kind to everyone means being kind to no one. Sometimes you have to choose."

Nut's expression darkened. "I don't want to choose. They're both my friends. I shouldn't have to pick sides."

"Maybe you already did," Tui said gently. "Without realizing it."

The words hit Nut like a punch to the chest.

"I didn't mean to," Nut said. His voice was small. Defeated. "I was just trying to be welcoming. Est seemed lonely. Hong seemed—fine. Busy, but fine. I thought—"

"You thought Hong didn't need you," Tui finished. "Because Hong is good at pretending he doesn't need anyone."

Nut was quiet. "I'm losing him," Nut said finally. "I can feel it. Hong's slipping away, and I don't know how to hold on. And I don't even know what I'm holding on to. We're friends. That's it. But it feels like—like more is at stake. Like I'm losing something bigger than friendship."

Tui looked at him for a long moment. "Have you ever considered that maybe Hong feels the same way?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean—" Tui chose his words carefully. "Maybe Hong is upset because this isn't just about friendship for him. Maybe it's about something else. Something deeper. Something he can't say."

Nut blinked. "You think—you think Hong has feelings for me?"

"I don't know," Tui said honestly. "But I know that people don't get this upset over nothing. And I know that Hong has been different lately. More closed off. More defensive. And it all started when Est started spending time with you."

The possibility settled over Nut like a weight.

Hong. Feelings. For me.

It had never occurred to him. Not once. Because they were friends. Because they'd always been friends. Because after everything that happened when they were fifteen, after the separation and the years apart and the rebuilding of their relationship when they found each other again in Bangkok—Nut had assumed that the romantic part was over. That it had been a teenage thing. A first love that had ended and made way for something steadier. Something safer.

But what if it hadn't ended? What if Hong had been carrying it this whole time?

"Shit," Nut said quietly.

"Yeah." Tui agreed.

Est sat in Dana's office, staring at his hands. He hadn't planned to come here. Hadn't planned to talk about any of this. But the weight of it—the guilt, the confusion, the sense that he'd broken something without meaning to—had become unbearable. Dana sat across from him, her tablet set aside, her full attention on Est in a way that made him feel both seen and exposed.

"Talk to me," Dana said gently. "What's going on?"

Est took a breath. "I think I hurt someone. Multiple people. And I don't know how to fix it."

"Start from the beginning," Dana said.

So Est did. He told her about the warehouse party. About the blurry memory of a night that felt important but that he couldn't fully recall. About the obsession with finding the person who had touched him with care. About focusing on Nut—watching him, studying him, spending time at the studio trying to solve the mystery. He didn't mention names. Didn't give details that would identify anyone. But he told her enough.

When he finished, Dana was quiet for a moment.

"Est," she said finally. "Ever since you got back from Miami, you've been walking around like a detective trying to solve your own life."

Est looked up.

"You've been so focused on finding this person—this answer—that you stopped seeing the people in front of you as people," Dana continued. "You turned them into clues. Into evidence. Into pieces of a puzzle instead of human beings with their own lives and feelings and histories."

The words landed like stones. "I didn't mean to," Est said quietly.

"I know," Dana said. "But intent doesn't erase impact. You can hurt people without meaning to. And the hurt is still real."

Est's throat felt tight. "How do I fix it?"

"You start by letting go of the mystery," Dana said. "You stop searching. You accept that maybe you'll never know who that person was. And you focus on being a good friend to the people who are here now. The people who are choosing you. Not because you're solving a mystery, but because they care about you."

"But what if the answer is important?" Est asked.

"Is it?" Dana challenged gently. "Or is the searching giving you something to focus on so you don't have to focus on the harder thing?"

"What harder thing?"

"Building real relationships," Dana said. "Letting people see you. Trusting that you're enough without the mystery. Without the performance. Without the armor."

Est was quiet.

"The person from that night cared about you," Dana continued. "Treated you with respect. Made you feel seen. That's beautiful. But Est—you have people in your life right now who are doing the same thing. Who are seeing you. Who are caring about you. And you're so busy looking backward that you're missing what's right in front of you."

The truth of it hit Est like a wave.

He'd been so focused on finding the mystery person that he'd ignored the people who were already there. Who were already caring for him. Who were already seeing him as whole instead of broken.

"I need to let it go," Est said.

"You need to let it go." Dana agreed.

Est stood outside the heavy metal door for a full five minutes before he found the courage to knock. When Nut opened it, his expression shifted from surprise to something softer. Almost relieved.

"Est," Nut said. "Hey. I wasn't expecting—come in."

"I can't stay," Est said quickly. "I just—I need to say something."

Nut stepped aside, gesturing for Est to enter anyway. "At least come in for a minute. It's hot out there."

Est stepped inside. The studio smelled the same—cold espresso, green soap, sandalwood. But it felt different. Heavier. Like the space itself was carrying grief.

"I've been coming here for the wrong reasons," Est said without preamble. "I was looking for something. An answer. And I made you part of that search without asking if you wanted to be. I'm sorry."

Nut frowned. "Est, you didn't do anything wrong. I don't—"

"I know," Est interrupted. "And that's part of the problem. You were just being kind. Being welcoming. And I took that kindness and turned it into something else. I used you. I used your space. I treated you like a clue instead of a person. And in doing that, I hurt someone you care about. Even if I didn't mean to."

Nut was quiet.

"I need to step back," Est continued. "I need to figure out who I am here without using other people as mirrors. Without searching for answers in other people's hands and voices and histories. I need to just—be. And I can't do that if I keep coming here."

"You're always welcome here," Nut said quietly. "You know that, right? Whatever this is about—whatever you were looking for—it doesn't change that you're part of this group. You belong here."

"Maybe," Est said. "But I need to belong to myself first. Before I can belong anywhere else."

He turned to leave.

"Est," Nut called after him.

Est stopped.

"I hope you find what you're looking for," Nut said. "Whatever it is."

"Me too," Est said.

And then he left.

As he walked down the hallway, away from the studio, away from the search, away from the obsession that had been consuming him for weeks—Est felt something shift.

Not relief, exactly. Not peace.

But space.

Room to breathe. Room to be. Room to figure out who Est was when he wasn't performing or searching or using other people to complete himself. It was terrifying. But it was also—necessary.

Nut sat across from Lego, an untouched ceramic cup of black tea between his hands. Lego stared out the window, his fingers folding and unfolding a paper napkin in a tight, nervous pattern. He wore his hair in two braids today, and a star-shaped hair clip held his bangs in place. He looked young. Fragile.

Nut broke the heavy silence, his voice descending to that deep, grave murmur he used when things were serious. "You ran after him, Lego. You didn't even look at me or Est. You just turned and ran. I've never seen you do that. You're the one who always sits down and helps everyone talk it out."

Lego didn't look up. His voice was dangerously soft when he finally spoke. "Because you didn't see him, P'Nut. You stood in that doorway and told me he'd be fine. That it was just a simple argument. You genuinely believed that."

Nut frowned, his jaw clenching. His need to take responsibility warred with his confusion. "Because it was. Hong gets sharp when he's stressed. I downplayed the museum thing because I didn't want him to feel left out. I was trying to protect his feelings."

Lego finally looked at him. His large, bright eyes met Nut's—and there was something there Nut had never seen before. A flash of anger. Of defensiveness. Of exhaustion. "You weren't protecting him," Lego said quietly. "You were lying by omission because it was easier than dealing with the truth."

The words hung in the air like smoke.

Nut recoiled slightly. "That's not—Lego, I wasn't trying to—"

"I know you weren't trying," Lego said, his voice still soft but carrying an edge now. "But that doesn't change what happened. You lied to him. And then when he found out, you made him feel crazy for being upset."

"I didn't make him feel—"

"You did," Lego interrupted. "By minimizing it. By acting like it was no big deal. By treating his feelings like they were an overreaction instead of a valid response to being lied to."

Nut was quiet. His hands tightened around the tea cup.

Lego's voice softened slightly. "It's fine that you're spending time with Est. And P'Hong shouldn't be rude to you. But you can't lie to him and expect him not to get upset. I don't want to choose sides. You're all my friends. But P'Nut—you have to understand that what you did hurt him. Really hurt him. And saying you didn't mean to doesn't make the hurt go away."

"I don't know how to fix it," Nut said. His voice was small. Defeated. "He won't talk to me. Won't answer my calls. I've tried everything, Lego. And I don't even know what I'm apologizing for because he won't tell me what's actually wrong."

Lego looked away, back out the window. "Maybe it's not your job to fix it. Maybe Hong needs to fix it himself. But you can't do that for him."

They sat in silence.

After a long moment, Nut looked at Lego—really looked at him—and noticed what he should have noticed weeks ago.

Lego had lost weight. His collarbones were prominent beneath the fabric of his shirt. His face looked thinner, the softness gone from his cheeks. Dark circles shadowed his eyes—the kind that came from weeks of not sleeping properly.

"Lego," Nut said, leaning forward. His voice shifted from defensive to concerned. "Look at yourself. You've lost weight. You have dark circles under your eyes. You look like you haven't slept in a week."

Lego picked up his tea, took a small sip. "I'm fine, P'Nut. Really. Just stressed about the upcoming dance showcase."

"Don't lie to me," Nut said gently. "Please don't lie to me when you just finished telling me not to lie."

Lego's hand shook slightly as he set the cup down.

"It's not the dance studio's fault," Nut continued. "It's us. Ever since Hong left my studio that night, everything's gone to hell. Hong won't answer my calls. Est's completely shut down and won't come near my apartment. And you—you ran after Hong, and now you're falling apart in front of me."

He reached across the table, his hand hovering near Lego's but not quite touching.

"You can't carry all of this," Nut said. "You can't put our problems before your own health. You can't run after us every time something breaks and expect to stay whole yourself."

Lego's eyes filled with tears. "I don't know how to stop," Lego whispered. "I don't know how to watch people I love hurt and not try to fix it. That's not—that's not how I work. I can't just stand by and do nothing."

"You're not doing nothing," Nut said. "You're being there. You're listening. You're caring. But Lego—you can't fix this. This is between me and Hong. And whatever it is, whatever he's not telling me—it's his to tell. Not yours."

"I know," Lego said. A tear slipped down his cheek. "I know that. But it doesn't make it easier to watch."

Nut finally reached across and took Lego's hand. Squeezed it gently.

"Take care of yourself first," Nut said. "Please. Eat. Sleep. Let us worry about ourselves for once."

Lego nodded. But they both knew he wouldn't listen.

Because that wasn't who Lego was.

The rhythmic hum of a vintage neon sign buzzed overhead, casting low, flickering pools of amber and indigo light over sticky wooden booths. The small bar, tucked away down a quiet alleyway near Tui and William's university, was mostly empty. It smelled of stale draft beer, fried snacks, and rain.

Tui sat with his chin resting in his hand, idly stirring a melting ice cube around his glass with a plastic straw. William sat beside him, his posture tense, his observant eyes tracking the entrance every time the rusted bell chimed.

When Lego finally arrived, he looked entirely hollowed out. His usual bright, performative energy was completely gone. He slid into the booth across from them without greeting, without his usual hug, without the brightness that was his signature.

He was wearing a long-sleeved white t-shirt that looked a size too big for his sloping shoulders. Sweatpants. Sneakers. No jewelry. No makeup. Hair in a simple ponytail instead of the elaborate styles he usually favored.

He looked—devastated.

William didn't say a word at first. He simply watched as Lego avoided eye contact, his hands folded in his lap, his entire body language screaming I don't want to be here but I don't want to be alone either.

For days, William had been tracking the micro-fractures spreading throughout their circle. He'd seen Hong disappear completely—no classes, no responses, just silence. He'd seen Nut wandering around looking lost and confused. He'd seen Est withdraw into himself, polite but distant, present but not there.

And he'd seen Lego deteriorating.

The dynamic wasn't just off. It was completely fractured.

Tui finally sighed, setting his straw down. "Did you try calling Hongshi again today?"

Lego's voice was barely audible. "He's... he's just really busy with a track."

The lie was so thin it was practically transparent.

Tui shook his head. "He hasn't been to class in three days. He's ignoring everyone's messages. This isn't just busy, Lego."

Lego didn't respond.

William exchanged a look with Tui. Don't push. Not yet.

"I'm going to grab us another round," Tui said, standing. He looked at Lego. "Do you want anything?"

"Just water," Lego whispered. Then, quieter: "Actually, can you choose something for me? Something that doesn't taste too strong?"

Tui returned a few minutes later, sliding a tall glass across the scarred wooden table toward Lego. The drink was dark, deceptively sweet, garnished with a thin wedge of lemon.

"Long Island iced tea," Tui said. "Sweet. Not too strong-tasting. But be careful—it hits harder than you think."

Lego nodded. Took a sip.

Then another.

Then he drained half the glass in one go.

"Lego—" William started.

"I'm fine," Lego said. His voice was already slightly off. "I just—I need to not think for a while. Is that okay? Can I just—not think?"

Tui and William exchanged another look. They should have stopped him. Should have taken the glass away. Should have insisted on water instead. But they didn't.

Because sometimes, when someone is breaking apart, you let them break. You let them have the small comfort they're asking for, even when you know it's not actually going to help.

Lego finished the first glass. Started on a second. By the time he was halfway through the second drink, the world had started to blur at the edges. The neon indigo light of the bar spun softly above his head. His body felt heavy and light at the same time.

He collapsed sideways, his head landing heavily on Tui's shoulder.

His hair brushed against Tui's neck. His hands, which normally moved in constant, frenetic rhythm, were now motionless and limp in his lap.

"Why do they have to fight?" Lego's voice was slurred, thick with intoxication and raw pain. "I hate this. I hate watching them hurt each other. I hate being in the middle. I hate—"

His voice broke.

"It's just a rough patch," Tui said gently, his hand moving to pat Lego's arm. He looked at William with worried eyes. "Friends fight. They'll get over it."

But Lego shook his head against Tui's shoulder. "No. No, you don't understand. It's not—it's not just a fight. It's bigger than that. It's—"

He stopped himself. Bit his lip. Hard enough to hurt.

I promised. I promised Hong I wouldn't tell.

"It's what?" William asked gently.

"Nothing," Lego said. But tears were already sliding down his face. "It's nothing. I'm just—I'm tired. I'm so tired of pretending everything's fine when it's not. I'm tired of smiling when I want to scream. I'm tired of holding everyone together when I'm falling apart."

He turned his face into Tui's shoulder and started crying in earnest. Not the pretty, delicate crying of someone who wanted comfort. The ugly, broken crying of someone who had been holding it together for too long and couldn't anymore.

Tui froze. His hand hovered in the air for a moment before landing gently on Lego's back. "Hey. Hey, it's okay. You're okay."

But William saw it—the way Tui's jaw tightened. The way his eyes widened slightly. The way his entire body language shifted from casual to protective in the space of a heartbeat. Lego was crying on Tui's shoulder. And Tui—Tui looked like his heart was breaking.

After a few minutes, Lego shifted. Moved from Tui's shoulder to William's. Like even in his intoxicated state, he was ashamed that Tui—his crush, the person he wanted to be strong for—was seeing him like this. William wrapped his arms around Lego and held him tightly.

"I'm sorry," Lego sobbed into William's shoulder. "I'm sorry. I'm a mess. I'm a complete mess."

"You're not a mess," William said quietly. "You're just human."

"I can't tell you," Lego said, his words slurring together. "I promised. I promised I wouldn't tell. And I won't. I won't break his trust. Even if it's killing me. Even if keeping the secret is destroying me. I won't. I won't."

William and Tui exchanged a heavy, deeply unsettled look across the table.

Lego hadn't betrayed Hong's secret. His loyalty had held firm through the wreckage of his words. But as he wept in the dim neon light, utterly ashamed and broken, it was clearer than ever that the secrets in their group were costing them everything.

Later that night.

Getting Lego home was a project. He could barely walk. His legs kept giving out, and he kept apologizing—over and over, an endless loop of I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm such a burden, I'm so sorry.

"He's going to trip over his own feet if we keep walking like this." William observed, watching Lego stumble for the third time in as many minutes.

Without a word, Tui stopped. He handed his bag to William and turned his back to Lego, bending his knees.

"Come here, Lego. Up you go."

Lego didn't hesitate. With a small, sleepy huff of breath, he draped himself over Tui's broad shoulders. His arms wrapped around Tui's neck with trusting, heavy looseness. Tui stood up, hooking his arms under Lego's knees to secure him. Lego's weight settled against his back—warm, solid, real.

"P'Tui is so warm," Lego murmured into the crook of Tui's neck, his voice a tiny, muffled vibration. He nuzzled his face against the collar of Tui's shirt, his loose curls tickling Tui's skin. "Like a big, safe bear."

Tui's expression softened, though he kept his gaze fixed on the pavement ahead to hide the sudden, protective tightening in his chest.

"Just stay still, Lego," Tui said gently. "We're almost there."

William walked silently beside them, carrying both bags. He watched the way Lego's bunny and chick keychains bounced gently with every step, their cheerful jingle sounding lonely in the empty street. They walked through Bangkok's late-night quiet—past closed storefronts and 7-Elevens still glowing with fluorescent light, past street vendors packing up for the night, past the occasional taxi cruising for fares.

Lego fell asleep halfway there. His breathing evened out. His body went completely limp against Tui's back.

"He's out," William observed.

"Good," Tui said quietly. "He needs to sleep."

They walked in silence for a few more minutes.

Then William spoke. "Do you know what's going on? Between Hong and Nut?"

"No," Tui said. "But Lego does. And whatever it is, it's eating him alive."

"Should we ask him?"

"No," Tui said firmly. "If he wanted to tell us, he would. Pushing him will just make it worse."

William nodded. But the question remained, hanging in the air between them like smoke.

What could be bad enough that keeping it secret would destroy Lego like this?

When they finally reached Lego's building, the concierge helped them get upstairs. Tui carried Lego all the way to his door, where William used Lego's keys—pulled from the outside pocket of his bag—to let them in.

They brought Lego to his bedroom. Laid him gently on the bed. Tui removed Lego's shoes. William found a blanket and draped it over him. Lego's face, in sleep, looked peaceful. Young. Like the weight he'd been carrying had finally been set down.

"We should stay," William said quietly. "Make sure he's okay."

Tui nodded. "I'll take the sofa."

They settled into Lego's living room—surrounded by aerial silks and polaroids and the evidence of a life built on brightness and care. And they kept watch over their friend, who had been keeping watch over everyone else.

And they wondered—separately, silently—how much longer any of them could keep holding on before everything fell apart completely.